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AUTHOR Sessions, John A.
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ABSTRACT

Unionism is not the antithesis of professionalism, but often the companion, or even supporter of professionalism, as in the cases of writers, actors, and musicians. Librarians, too, must earn a living and cope with inflation. Joining a union can not only improve librarians' economic status, but also increase their influence. Collective bargaining provides an orderly procedure for resolving conflict. Of all existing collective bargaining contracts in the United States, fewer than 5 percent involved strikes. (LS)

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PROFESSIONALISM AND UNIONS

Dr. John A. Sessions
Assistant Director, AFL-CIO
Department of Education

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I have been asked to speak on professionalism and unions. Let me say emphatically that these terms are not mutually exclusive, nor do they always mean the same thing even to the same people. The National Education Association, for example, once declared that it is unprofessional to belong to a union. Today the NEA proudly proclaims that it too is a union.

Throughout Plato's Dialogues, Socrates is depicted as bristling at the Sophists who had made great inroads in Athenian education. First and foremost, Socrates accused the Sophists of teaching bad thinking habits and on this point he made a convincing case.

But a second charge which he leveled against the Sophists can only sound eccentric in the twentieth century. He accused the Sophists of being unprofessional because they taught for money! Clearly Socrates would not have

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been a very good candidate for membership in the American Federation of Teachers.

Almost as though in answer to Socrates, John Dewey, who did become a member of the AFT in 1915, once explained:

> It is said that the Teachers Union, as distinct from the more academic organizations, overremphasizes the economic aspect of teaching. Well, I never had that contempt for the economic aspect of teaching, especially not on the first of the month when I get my salary check. I find that teachers have to pay their grocery and meat bills and house-rent just the same as everybody else.

Among those who did not join a union were the librarians of a southern town who, during the 1930's, were required to sign the following contract:

> I promise to take a vital interest in all phases of Sunday-school work, donating of my time, service, and money without stint for the uplift of the community. I promise to abstain from all dancing, immodest dressing, and other conduct unbecoming a lady. I promise not to go out with any young men except insofar as it may be necessary to stimulate Sunday-school work. I promise not to fall in love, to become engaged, or secretly married. I promise to sleep at least eight hours a night, to eat carefully, and to take every precaution to keep in the best of health and spirits in order that I may better be able to render efficient service to the public. I promise to remember that I owe a duty to the townspeople who are paying my wages, that I owe respect to the library board that hired me and that I shall consider myself at all times the willing servant of the library board and the townspeople and that I shall cooperate with them to the limit of my ability in any movement aimed at the betterment of the community.

If those librarians did not join a union, it was not because they thought it would be an unprofessional thing to do; it was rather because they lived a life of fear. I don't think that any librarian anywhere today would promise the library board not to fall in love, to sleep any specified amount of time, or to be a servant to the board. And the important thing is

that they are the more professional for their refusal to do these things.

The AFL-CIO and the AFL before it have never been exclusively blue collar organizations. Unions have included in their ranks teachers, symphony musicians, stage and screen actors, journalists, radio and television commentators and entertainers. Librarians are joining unions in ever increasing numbers. Surely no one would suggest that Walter Cronkite or the members of the New York Philharmonic are less professional for being union members. And the story of what Actors' Equity has done to raise the professional standards of the American theater is a part of theatrical history.

Many unions which are not made up entirely of professionals nevertheless have large numbers of professionals among their membership. The International Union of Electrical Workers, the American Federation of Government Employees, and the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Workers are examples of such unions.

A recent development has been the establishment of the Council of AFL-CIO Union for Professional Employees. This will give professional workers an organizational strength similar to that of the Building Trades Council and the Metal Trades Council.

Professionals gain strength through an alliance with labor. A handful of librarians in a university or in a public library have very little bargaining power, but with the strength of numbers that comes from affiliation with the labor movement, a few people can participate in the shaping of their own economic destinies.

And rarely have librarians needed that economic strength as they do today. Federal, state and local funds for library service have been cut back drastically, confronting library personnel with the same economic anxieties that other workers contend with. Librarians' earnings have kept up with neither inflation nor the earnings of the rest of the work force. In the modern Scylla and Charybdis

of simultaneous recession and inflation, librarians need all of the political allies they can get. And I submit that they can best find those allies by affiliating with the 14,500,000 members of the AFL-CIO.

Albert Einstein foresaw this very kind of a situation more than 30 years ago. Much as John Dewey had written of the teachers, Einstein wrote:

> I consider it important, indeed urgently necessary for intellectual workers to get together, both to protect their own economic status and also, generally speaking, to secure their influence in the political field.

And yet librarians have sometimes been slow to unionize. Perhaps they have had a feeling that librarians must be detached and objective whereas unions thrive on conflict. When librarians talk about unions, the discussion often begins to center on the nonprofessional basis of strikes.

I want to meet this issue head on. Unions do not make conflict and collective bargaining does not make conflict. Unions and collective bargaining came into being because conflict exists in the workplace. Without unions, conflict takes place under the rules of jungle law. Collective bargaining provides an orderly procedure for resolving conflict when it arises. It provides a grievance procedure through which efforts to resolve the conflict proceed through a succession of levels, ending if necessary by submission of the issue to a professionally trained arbitrator who hears the evidence from both sides, refers the matter to the language of the collective bargaining agreement and finally renders a decision which is legally binding on both sides. Surely this is a more professional approach to conflict than jungle law.

What then about strikes? First of all I want to make it clear that I believe the right to strike is a fundamental right of free men and women. But it is important to put strikes in proportion. There are approximately 150,000 collective bargaining agreements in force in the United States today. Of these,

147,000 were successfully negotiated without any work-stoppage taking place. This is an important fact, often overlooked in discussions about collective bargaining. There is an element of excitement about a strike that draws public attention, but there is much less attention given to the thousands of union-management agreements that are regularly negotiated without any work-stoppage. This triumph of free democratic labor-management relations is so commonplace that it is not newsworthy and is therefore usually overlooked.

I should add that virtually all collective bargaining agreements include a "no-strike" clause and strikes during the life of the agreement are so rare that no one bothers to count them.

I might add two personal notes. The first is that I have been a union member for 35 years and in that entire 35 years I have been on strike for only a total of five days.

My second note may surprise some of you. Those of us who are on the staff of the AFL-CIO have a union which bargains for us. It is hard bargaining because we have experts on both sides of the bargaining table. I should hate to think that this places me in an adversary position with regard to the AFL-CIO. I love the AFL-CIO and that is why I work there. I feel a deep sense of personal identity with the AFL-CIO which is in no way diminished by my membership in a staff union.

Professionals will make a tragic error if they set the course of their economic interest on the basis of imaginary fears. There is too much to fear in reality for that.

In this regard, I would like to recall a bit of fairly recent history. Unlike most recent history, this episode has a happy ending. The Public Relations Reporter, published by the Public Relations Office of the American Library Association, devoted its entire March 1967 issue to an article on how to counteract efforts to organize library staff unions. The entire tone of the publication was anti-labor. Worst of all, the publication included among other suggestions that in blocking the formation of staff unions, library adminstrators

might justify their actions by pointing to ALA's longstanding Joint Committee with the AFL-CIO. This it was suggested, would help to counteract any possible anti-labor image. The publication even suggested that starting a joint library program with local unions might well be timed in such a way as to counteract staff unionism.

The labor members of the Joint Committee on Library Service to Labor Groups were quick to express their sense of outrage at having their sincere efforts compromised into an anti-union public relations gimmick. Librarian members of the committee were equally quick to respond. Edwin Beckerman, new Chairman of the Joint Committee, said, "I have seldom read as slanted and biased a publication."

The Joint Committee unanimously adopted a resolution requesting the ALA to publicly declare "a policy which recognizes the freedom of all library employees to choose whether or not they will belong to unions and engage in collective bargaining."

The Board of Directors of the Adult Services Division unanimously endorsed the Joint Committee resolution and, meeting here in this city eight years ago this week, the ALA executive Board affirmed the right of library personnel to join unions and to engage in collective bargaining.

The Public Relations Reporter in its September 1967 issue published in a box the following contrite note: "The National Labor Relations Act recognizes and guarantees the right of each employee to bargain collectively with his employer. This being the law of the land, it is the policy of the American Library Association."

For eight years, this has been the policy of the ALA. I urge you to take advantage of it. The 14,500,000 AFL-CIO members, white collar workers, blue collar workers, and professions, invite librarians to join with them in pursuit of a better life for all.